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FANFICTION AS A FORM WITH MERIT

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Abstract

Fanfiction is a form of writing with a vast wealth of merits, and it should be respected as a unique and valuable literary genre. I have read a number of scholarly articles written regarding fanfiction, analyzed certain works and my own experiences within the fan community, and considered original media in order to construct my defense of fanfiction's value as a literary form. Fanfiction has an unfortunately poor reputation, given the unique advantages it provides to authors. Fanfiction is an egalitarian learning tool, with a thriving community and a significant impact upon the individuals engaging with fanfiction creation. Fanfiction is an opportunity to explore nuance and create diversity, with boons to authors' writing and the social atmosphere.

Key Words: fanfiction, value, merit, importance, writing, literature, English, fans, community, transformative works

Fanfiction is the term used to describe written works that are based upon someone else's original story. Bronwen Thomas, a lecturer of English and New Media at Bournemouth University, defines fanfiction as, "stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a 'canon' of work" (1). Fanfiction most frequently utilizes the canon's characters, but will often also contain elements of the original story's plot and setting. As an author of fanfiction and avid reader of fan and traditionally published fiction alike, it is worth noting that I have well over six years of informal experience interacting with fanfiction and its relating components.

Some people look down upon fanfiction, believing it to be a lesser form of fiction, or a waste of energy that could be better spent on original fiction. Peter Gutiérrez, an English teacher in primary education, has noted that many of his fellow educators are "instinctively certain that [fan] behavior is something that [they] should fight, or at least keep in check," and that some adopt a form of pretentious self-flattery by refusing "association with pop culture" (Gutiérrez 227). The pervasive idea that fanfiction is childish, or counterproductive to a writer's growth, is commonplace. Another complaint is that the internet and fan communities can get wildly out of hand in a negative manner, which is, admittedly, true, but the same can be said for any large group of people, and traditional publishing has its failings as well. According to Kathryn Dunlap and Carissa Wolf, who wrote for *Mechademia*, a journal dedicated to creative and critical work on fan content, there are "less-than-polite interactions that are relatively commonplace when there is any sort of anonymity online" (268). The fandom community "will also criticize each other" for misbehavior, but that can rapidly devolve into further squabbling (Dunlap 278). Some folk "deride fan fiction perceived as narcissistic," state Anupam Chander and Madhavi Sunder in their discussion of fanfiction and fair use in the *California Law Review* (599). Fanfiction is

perceived as being purely for vanity, and of lesser worth, as it does not interact with the marketplace. Katrien Jacobs, who has written an article about fandom erotica in *Cinema Journal*, has noted that fetishization of same-sex relationships is ever present, and that some fans believe that “gay sex scenes [are] for female consumers” and “lesbian counterparts are... a new type of ‘soft’ arousal for males” (128). The criticisms of fanfiction range from legitimate to childish, and are professed enough to create a whole outlook on fanfiction that is negative.

While fanfiction most certainly has its slew of problems, both genuine and imagined, its advantages are far superior. Issues notwithstanding, fanfiction deserves understanding, recognition, and ultimately respect. My goal is to further that understanding, share my knowledge of the benefits surrounding fanfiction, and prove its worthiness of esteem. Fanfiction is an art form with a vast wealth of merits, and it should be respected as a unique and valuable literary genre.

Fanfiction serves a variety of purposes, and one worth noting is that fanfiction is a tool of learning. Gutiérrez can vouch for how being an ardent fan can help young readers. Many young, up and coming, or even practiced writers utilize fanfiction as a method to improve their writing and hone their skills, and fanfiction can be seen as “an opportunity for young readers to develop critical and media literacies” (Gutiérrez 227). Even without this specific intention, improvement is inevitable even when the only immediate goal is enjoyment. The best way to develop a skill is to practice it, and the art of writing is no different. Fanfiction is a recreational, enjoyable activity, but it still serves as a tool that allows writers to grow and stretch the mental muscles involving creativity with the written word. Unfortunately, “most schools... steadfastly continue to dismiss popular culture and media as frivolous, potentially harmful, and as a distraction from more important (e.g., formal) learning endeavors,” according to Rebecca Black, an instructor for youth

learning English who has observed her own students' tendencies with fanfiction ("Convergence" 126). In reality, fanfiction is regularly used in academia as a learning tool; it simply goes by a different name. Mimicry has almost always been a method employed, from high school teachers telling their students to try and emulate Edgar Allan Poe's writing style, to class assignments of picking a Greek myth and retelling it to refine a student's writing. Fanfiction uses the same basic principle—in almost every way it is indistinguishable from assigned copycatting tasks—but it is voluntary, active, and done for pleasure. Although it does not originate in an academic setting, and will never become published as traditional works of greatness have been, fanfiction should not be considered a lesser form of writing.

In some cases, such as with people who learn English as a second language, fanfiction actually helps students improve at a significantly faster rate than their peers ("Convergence" Black 135). Rebecca Black conducted an analysis of English language learners "through roughly a year of focused participant observation" and acquired an understanding of how language operates within fandom communities ("Access" 120). To do is better than to be told, and fanfiction makes "literacy instruction relevant for [ELL] students and their everyday lives," in the sense that people who are learning English are engaging with it in a profound and meaningful way ("Access" Black 128). Reading a story in English might be one thing—most people can read or listen in a language that they're learning fairly well—but to write within that foreign language requires knowledge of the vocabulary, grammar structures, and tone. Fanfiction promotes self-taught language learning in informal settings, but it also provides a platform for peers to help educate as well. Fanfiction critiques generally "focus on function rather than form," which matches up with "theories of effective language teaching that emphasize the importance of the communicative function of language" ("Access" Black 126). What is important in fanfiction,

first and foremost, is to get the story across. Anyone who reads fanfiction regularly, myself included, can attest to being willing to read unpolished work—happy to do so, even—so long as the story being told is engaging. This is a boon to ELLs, because it is the content that they intend to convey, minor technical errors notwithstanding. Readers point out mistakes in, draw the author’s attention to, or ask clarifying questions for the content, which lets writers know where they’re slipping up and how to improve upon their communicative skills.

Fanfiction has cropped up as an “alternative, transitional learning [community]” that allows writers to grow and explore in more meaningful ways than academic settings often provide, not only through simple practice, but through the use of others’ works as tools, standing on the shoulders of giants as authors create fan works (“Convergence” Black 125). Because fanfiction revolves around certain settings, characters, or plotlines that already exist, writers are able to “incorporate an interplay of officially sanctioned forms of knowledge, such as traditional writing conventions and genres, and unofficial forms of knowledge, such as intimate knowledge of the characters and settings of the” cannon source (“Convergence” Black 126-127). Given pre-established tools that authors can then use, fans are able to seize characters and narratives and transform the work that inspired them and let their creativity loose with the foundation that the inspirational material has provided for them. It is a “practice-based approach” to technical writing skills, which is the most effective method (“Convergence” Black 127). If writing original fiction is like baking from scratch, then fanfiction is a bit like using cake mix: still creation, just with a bit of outside help at the starting point.

Fanfiction fosters analytical skills too, as a writer must first observe and analyze what drives a character to act the way they do, what events caused which mindsets and influenced their decisions, how the met textual influence of a story’s genre plays a role, and how a character

would act in a different situation. By conducting these analyses, authors “gain meta-awareness and insight into why these genres and conventions exist and how they are useful”

(“Convergence” Black 140). Authors are frequently analytical enough that they are able to change their readers’ “engagement with the storyworlds about which they write” through their fanfictions (Thomas 10). In *Homestuck*, a webcomic written by Andrew Hussie, the relationship between the characters Jake and Jane involves Jake frequently using Jane as an ear to vent his frustrations upon without truly listening to her or returning the emotional labor. In *A Spark, A Flame, A Fire* by callmearcturus, their relationship is once again portrayed in such a manner, but this time in a different setting, with different consequences, and callmearcturus’ speculation on why Jake could or would act so selfishly when he is, in all other cases, a giving and compassionate individual, is so finely nuanced yet reasonably plain that readers are able to gain a better understanding of Jake’s character and motivations. Fanfiction compels writers to take a thorough look at settings and events and their impact on a character, and then see how that character changes and twists when transformed by a new setting, with a new plotline.

By engaging with fanfiction, writers must first examine their own interpretation of the media, but then open themselves up to engage with other fans’ understandings and interpretations. Thanks to the way the fan community functions, “fans meet up [online], not only to write... fanfictions but also to read and peer review each other’s fictions while socializing, debating, and discussing the finer points of” the canon material (“Convergence” Black 127). By engaging with fandom debates and discourse, many gain the practice and ability to “make informed decisions about how to use different forms of language and representation to achieve certain purposes, with specific audiences” and further their analytical skills (“Convergence”

Black 133). The ability to rationally interpret source material is a valuable skill, one that improves by writing fanfiction, which is part of why fanfiction is such a valuable literary form.

The comments section of fanfiction function as conversational spaces to engage with other readers, just as classroom discussions are homes of in-person debates about the text. This is done without the pressure of a grade, which causes many to hesitate and reign in their ideas, lest they are too obscure or off-base from what their instructor wants, and also fanfiction lacks any authority figure that could put a damper on the fun. In academic spaces, the school or teacher assigns the topic, and provides a grade, and academic writing is “evaluated primarily according to form and conventions, whereas the content or meaning value of their texts takes a back seat” (“Convergence” Black 131). Fanfiction removes the pressure that could otherwise make the author lock up, or grow to resent the exercise of transformative and creative work.

A teacher is supposed to be a “listener and observer,” but the writing produced for workshops can be constrained by the teacher’s own “expertise and knowledge” (“Convergence” Black 130). An issue for many teachers is that they value literary fiction over genre fiction—even speaking from personal experience, I have been asked by two college professors of fiction-writing courses and one high school English teacher to please refrain from writing genre fiction. Meanwhile, there are plenty of students who place high value on genre and are deeply aware of preexisting tropes, themes, and nuances that, within the genre, do not need an explanation. The teacher’s shortcomings then color their ability to provide appropriate feedback, and the student has to choose between tailoring their work to match their professor’s tastes, spending an arduous amount of time explaining things their target audience is already fully aware of, or losing valuable feedback that they’re taking the workshop in order to find. Even if a teacher can provide meaningful feedback pertinent to the student’s writing and interests, “with the curricular

demands and time constraints that many teachers are working under, there is little time or opportunity for students to actively experiment with” the media they interact with (“Convergence” Black 133). Academia does not always align with students’ interests, and cannot always meet the specific needs of young authors just growing into their niches.

With fanfiction, the only readers that engage with the posted work are already members of the target audience. No explanations are required for commonplace tropes, and feedback is fitting and knowledgeable. For example, when a story like *Endangered* sets the premise of a robot apocalypse, the only sentence necessary to fully ensconce the readership in the setting is, “Androids have all but won the war against humanity, and the remnants of the once-great human civilization are reduced to miles of wastelands and hidden communities struggling to survive” (Mortior). The fans who read *Endangered* know what post-robot apocalyptic societies look like, give or take a couple of details, and don’t need paragraphs upon paragraphs of early exposition to set the stage; fanfiction provides a sphere in which writers can jump directly into the plot—keeping the pacing at the beginning as sharp as the rest of the story—and concisely convey whatever finer nuance is present. The tradeoff of this is that fanfiction authors are able to spend as much time as they want focusing and examining the inner workings of the characters. Space is freed, within familiar narratives, to explore the unfamiliar, the curious, and the private inner workings of a character’s mind. A knowledgeable readership can improve the experience of both the author and the audience, and fanfiction allows people to seek out the works that they appreciate.

As a tool of learning and practice, fanfiction is undoubtedly useful, and another important element is in the community of fanfiction. I mentioned that critics can find glaring flaws within fanfiction communities, with nasty readers and flammers—people who comment only to degrade

and upset the author—creating unpleasant experiences. This behavior is characteristic only of part of the fan community, however, and not the whole. The miscreants tend to be the loudest and draw the most attention, which has caused fan communities to receive a bad reputation, but in reality fan communities tend to be quite welcoming. The community is a crucial part of what makes fanfiction such a unique variety of literature.

Community, in the realm of fanon and in fanfiction specifically, is a critically important element, seeing as “many adolescents who participate in affinity spaces cite the availability of readers as a reason for their engagement” according to Jen Curwood, a lecturer at the University of Sydney, Alecia Magnifico, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Illinois, and Jayne Lammers, an assistant professor at the University of Rochester (681). It would be “[impossible to focus] solely on the fanfiction text,” says Thomas, “without taking into account how aspects of the interface and website design impact upon the reading experience, or how that experience is shaped by the responses and discussions generated by the stories” (20). In fact, without the community of fanon, few authors would be as far as they are in their writing; few artists would create as much as they do, and few people would have made as many friends as they have. Thanks to “the constant dialogue between authors and their readers, and the fact that these roles are so readily interchangeable, [it is] impossible to fully appreciate fanfiction without looking at how the stories are received and talked about” (Thomas 15-16). Each fanfiction naturally belongs to the one who writes it, just as the source material belongs to those who created it, but comments from readers help mark inconsistencies with canon, workshop ideas the author has, and sometimes whole fanfictions are written solely to please or excite a friend made within the fandom.

Intense emotional bonds are formed through the creation and sharing of fanfiction. Even speaking from personal experience, the fan community, and specifically my place as a fanfiction author, led to the circumstances that allowed me to meet the woman who is currently my girlfriend. Bonds of varying intimacies are formed through fanfiction, like that of my girlfriend and myself, simple friendships like that of myself and my companion, Luneth, acquaintanceships such as myself and Aqua, and readerships like myself and Lillian. I know that Luneth and Aqua are fast friends thanks to the sharing of their fanfiction with each other, and that Aqua and someone using the pseudonym Consuelo have become buddies due to their shared ideas that they broadcast within fandom spaces. I frequently observe people whose blogs I follow chatting with each other publicly, not always to debate or analyze, but sometimes simply to enjoy each other's company through discussion of shared passions, which I would be able to join in on, if I were inclined to do so. Not everyone is going to wind up best friends, and yes, sometimes fandom discourse is the exact opposite of constructive. Fans are perfectly capable of becoming nasty, as Dunlap and Wolf mentioned, and a certain percentage of any fandom will inevitably be made up of the sort of person who doesn't play well with others. But as a whole fanfiction facilitates an environment that encourages readers, writers, artists, and viewers to all engage in open dialogue, to support the works of those around them and gain ideas from opinions and viewpoints other than their own.

The sharing of ideas, analyses, criticisms, and friendships makes a feedback loop in which fans create, which informs and inspires others, who then go and create, and ever onward the cycle continues. Fanfiction provides "safe and unthreatening access to the many resources of [the] writing community" ("Access" Black 125). Academic discussion features the converging of multiple students' views and collaboration of ideas, and it is not abnormal for classroom settings

to be based wholly on the concept of engaging with a text and then each other, creating meaning through dialogue. Here at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, most of our English classes revolve around discussion; engaging with peers is our axis. Fanfiction is much the same, with not just twenty to thirty peers, but hundreds, maybe thousands, occasionally millions of people enjoying the same source material and spreading their thoughts and opinions, and “fans can access vast communities of people who share their interests, publish and get feedback on their stories almost instantaneously, and challenge boundaries between authors and readers” (Thomas 2). Obviously no single fanfiction is going to get a million hits, but the potential for a vast audience is there. Writers in media often get a bad rap, commonly depicted jokingly as reclusive, rude, socially inept fools, or not-so-jokingly, in the case of Will Self, a novelist who writes for *The Guardian*, who claims that authors must “spend anything up to 20 or 30 years of your adult life in solitary confinement” in order to be successful. But that is not the case with fanfiction at all; it is a heavily community-based genre. The feedback and interactions are vital parts of the authors’ growth. Because of the aforementioned focus on function over form, fanfiction comments are better suited to the literary growth of the author. The “intellectual practices” that “occur outside of institutionalized settings, particularly within new-media settings” are generally preferred to most feedback provided in classroom settings, and are certainly more helpful on a larger scale than simple copyediting (Dunlap 270). While copy editors are blessings, and I in no way attempt to undermine the work they do, the general feedback received by fan authors from their readership is content-driven, helping authors refine the core of their writing, not just the technicalities.

Fanfiction authors do have copy editors, however, often referred to as beta readers. These beta readers bring their own skills and talents to the works of their peers, sometimes those who

are friends, sometimes just to anyone who has made a shout out on social media that they share interests with, and because they share the interests of the author they are better able to provide precise, genre-appropriate feedback alongside their quest for typos and homophones. Beta readers are also often able to help point out cultural and historical inaccuracies in fanfiction, appropriate to their knowledge (“Convergence” Black 137). Feedback culture creates a “strong sense of audience and community” and cultivates a “highly social nature of writing,” creating an ever-expanding web of talents, knowledge, and dialogue (“Access” Black 127). The social aspect of fanfiction provides “patterns of participation” that people find “manageable, meaningful, and motivating,” which allow them to successfully tackle even the boring tasks of improving on technical matters like grammar and typos (“Convergence” Black 128). While some find the academic sphere, as it is now, to be stifling and uninteresting, fanfiction and fandoms provide the environment that allows people to engage with writing and language learning activities by merit of shared interest and desirable social bonds, even to the point of improving one’s technical skills.

Fanfiction also encourages the refinement of talents not located in the literary sphere, as fanfiction can and does frequently inspire fan art. I myself have received a number of art pieces from friends and readers—some of them people I had never spoken to before they presented their gifts. Fan artists can also inspire fanfiction writers, who then encourage the artists around them, and the cycle of positivity and creativity continues on, fueled by mutual love of characters and plotlines. Within fanon, across all creative forms, “community members engage in ongoing, meaningful, and authentic discourse with *each other*,” bringing about more genuine understanding of the original media and inspiring creative endeavors that consistently build upon each other (Gutiérrez 230). Art and literature have always had this mutually beneficial

relationship; I would like to gesture to the entirety of the Renaissance for this claim.

Michelangelo is revered as one of the Renaissance's finest artists for his Bible fan art, and John Milton's Bible fanfiction, *Paradise Lost*, is still read and studied well over 300 years after it was written. Fanart and fan writing are important methods of engaging with a source material, with artists and authors working together to interpret the work and frequently inspiring each other.

Humanity has always had the desire to take what is familiar and transform it, bring freshness to age-old stories and new interpretations to familiar narratives, but copyright claims and increasing heat to find something entirely original, instead of a fulfilling compilation of knowledge and experiences, has made the journey of creation more difficult to navigate. Storytelling is a social action, and "fanfiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk" (Harmon). Fanfiction "takes us away from the notion of texts as static, isolated objects," that are convenient, marketable, and meant to turn a profit, "and instead reminds us that storyworlds are generated and experienced within specific social and cultural environments" (Thomas 6). Fanfiction is an act of the people, the community, the transformative nature of the human spirit, and is an act of resistance against capitalist notions of worth.

The monetary aspect of published literature is a hulking, looming monster upon every original-fiction author's literary horizon. The fact of the matter is this: novelettes and novellas do not sell as well as short stories or novels. Publishers want their fiction under 7,500 words, the maximum length of a short story, or over 40,000, the generally accepted minimum for a novel ("Nebula"). Since the trilogy is the current hot button literary form, publishers push hard for that as well. Alan Rinzler, an editor and Harvard graduate, claims that "short story collections are [a] big business," but Jack Smith, a journalist for *The Writer* points out that novellas, which fit in

that middle range, “are a hard commercial sell even if you bundle two to three of them or include your novella in a short story collection.” In-house formatting adds another layer of restrictions—I can vividly recall a book shown in my Editing and Publishing course exemplifying that sometimes the publisher gets to call the shots, even if the author would really have preferred to have “okay” as opposed to “OK” in her work—and the market for stories dictates much of the content that is sellable. An example would be how storylines with heterosexual love stories tacked on—even if the story has nothing to do with romance—sell better, because that is what people want and expect, which leads to publishers pushing for heterosexual romantic subplots, which leads to a flooding of heterosexual subplots in popular media, which creates an expectation within the mind of the consumer, which means they’re more likely to purchase stories that fit their expectations, and on and on the cycle goes. Publishers are wary “on sexual representation... and authors have adopted their deeply ingrained worries” (Jacobs 126). This is not only true of orientation, but also sexual content in general. Erotica is not what immediately comes to mind when thinking of staples of literature, but it is certainly ever-present, like those paperbacks now easily found at the checkout of grocery stores and convenience shops. Yet most erotica is deeply unsatisfying, provides false examples of sexual relations, and is poorly written. Fanfiction authors are better at erotic fiction than are the published variety—the only time a fanfiction author has ever forced me to read that one character ‘mashed’ their face against another was in a joke fanfiction. I believe that this is in greater part due to more proficient writers focusing their efforts on more widely accepted forms of their craft, the variety that lacks explicit sexual content, and the people willing to cater to the more limited audience erotica targets are therefore less skilled. All this is dependent on where people are putting their money,

because if certain types of books or writing seem most likely to turn a profit, publishers are willing to put the restrictions they deem necessary on what they sell.

Authors in general tend to resent the strict regulations imposed upon their works—while some boundaries are set in place for clear and obviously beneficial purposes, some feel utterly arbitrary or outright counterproductive to the pursuit of creativity—and fanfiction authors use their work to push beyond the expectations of popular media, or leave the restrictions thereof at the door. Chuck Sambuchino, a journalist for *Writer's Digest*, states that “55,000 – 79,999 [words] is a great range,” but warns against going under or above standardized ranges for fear of publishers perceiving the work as too short or too long. Fanfiction offers “power and control over their own thinking” and storytelling, so if a fanfiction author wants to slow down and write 81,000 words of someone contemplating how life in an alien society would work, they are able to do exactly that, as is the case in *Insurrection for Desperate Dreamers* by archive user mtjester (“Convergence” Black 140). Fanfiction authors write exactly as much as they need to, and stop when they are done. If someone wants to write 87,000 words of one storyline, as is the case with *chamomile, rose water, and other unlikely intoxicants* by callmearcturus, there is no pressure to butcher or expand the narrative. Enough is exactly enough; the story was done and, more importantly, done well. Sumomomochi, author of *Stars and Sparrows*, did not feel the need to butcher his/her fanfiction so it could fit within the confines of a short story. Enough was exactly enough, the story went on as long as it needed, in this case, a little over 17,000 words (sumomomochi). In my own experience, I have written one of three acts in a fanfiction of mine, and that first act is approximately 245,000 words. Despite being the length of nearly four or five books already, I am nowhere near done, and that is in part because I allow myself to slow down and linger on the moments that would be cut in order to fit an ideal if I were to write a published

story. Naturally, people do indeed insist upon the pacing and concision of published writing for a reason, and I do not intend to indicate that the practice is completely useless, but there is no single way to write correctly, and what audiences want varies greatly when multiple options are presented. The volatility of fanfiction and removal of hard boundaries is unique, and fanfiction is valuable for the possibilities it opens up.

A great deal of preference has to do with what is presented to mainstream readers as desirable. I touched on this earlier with heterosexual feedback loops, but orientation is not the only element that is limited in our society. Writing forms are confined to certain popular, accepted styles, and even authors who try to branch out still keep themselves limited in scope. Part of this is how people learn: there is a great deal of stress on how to write the ‘right’ way in public education—which, again, is indeed helpful, and I would not claim that it isn’t—but it is restrictive. Even permitting that many stylistic choices or writing structures taught in schools are valuable, “educational institutions... have a deep distrust of popular culture” (Gutiérrez 227). Genre fiction must constantly fight to defend its place at the table of literature, despite the fact that that’s what many people enjoy reading the most. As much as some people would like to dictate the ways others engage with literature, “realistic fan practices [do] not cherry-pick based on ideological structures of academia” (Dunlap 281). Writing and reading serve great purpose regardless of the peer group or guidance of someone more experienced, and “we need not be afraid of academic practices moving out of the ‘institution’ and into the hands of fandom practitioners” (Dunlap 271). A preference for what is common does not indicate worth, and just because certain content or styles have been the way things are frequently done does not mean they are more right than others.

The audience—the culture that lives and breathes and changes with each year that passes—determines a text's value. In an essay about the merits of fanfiction, I would be remiss not to state that just because fanfiction cannot be sold does not mean it does not have an audience. Fanfiction is a way of building upon current culture, and that is how people “can actually *create* culture, not just preserve it” (Gutiérrez 228). The interests of the audience are reflected in the interests of the authors, as the two roles are highly interchangeable within fandom spaces—which is another facet of how fanfiction is a unique form. Just as fanfiction is written for pleasure, fans also “stress the importance of reading for pleasure,” and that pleasure occurs because fans are engaging with something that is meaningful to them (Gutiérrez 228). Even a sparsely read fanfiction is worthwhile because the author wanted it, thought on it, and wrote it, and the readers invested their time into something they deemed worth doing. The works that bring joy to the audience, whether through genuinely peppy narratives or emotionally gruesome tales that titillate, are the works people will continue to seek out, and the stories best sought-after are the ones that shape the culture.

In this capitalist society that demands the almighty dollar be worshipped as the modern-day idol, fanfiction authors sit at their desks, on their couches, and in their beds, and with every word they write they assert the fact that passion is worth more than money, worth more than the broken ideal of usefulness. Authors are aware that fanfiction cannot be sold, and do not want the pity of those who think fan authors are giving their stories, time, and effort away on something frivolous. It is a great act of hope, as well as rebellion, to stand in a society that spins on the access of wealth and choose emotion, connection, and passion. Yes, plenty of authors of original fiction will not have their works published either, but fanfiction authors are aware of this from beginning to end, and at no point does a fanfiction author entertain notions of publication, or

hold that as a goal. *The New York Times* Best Sellers List “[reflects] unit sales reported” by vendors, ranking the merit of traditionally published works by the profit generated (“About”). Marketability is therefore equated with value, which might not be the intended outcome, but is the result nonetheless. Publishing houses must, of course, stay in the black, and authors deserve to be paid for the culmination of their years of study and practice, I do not deny that, but if a work fails to be among the best, that does not mean it is bad. Some fanfiction authors crank out their work in a couple hours’ time, while others spend hours in libraries researching old naval ranks for a single paragraph of exposition in their fanfiction or spend countless nights studying differences between European and North American wolves—like I have done—and authors pour as much effort into their research as a historical novelist might, not because fanfiction authors hope to turn a profit or become a big name within a market, but because it is the passion that drives us, that propels many fanfiction authors into motion out of simple love for their work. That love, that drive, that passion, that is the true core of fanfiction, and that is worth far more, to me, to my fellow writers, and to those who read our work, than any dollar bill. There is worth in that.

There is worth, too, in the “ridiculous tropey or out-there shit” (shinelikethunder), the sort that no one in their right mind would ever publish because it is poorly written, or inaccurate, or whatever myriad of reasons people could fairly and justifiably have for rejecting a work. The worth stems from the creativity, experimentation, and the emotion imparted upon the readership. In my admittedly subjective opinion, the ultimate goal of story writing should be to experiment and either entertain or move the author and/or audience. Ursula LeGuin, author of *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, once said, “Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don’t we consider it his duty to escape” and

that as writers, we are “to take as many people with us as we can,” which is a sentiment I am wholly inclined to agree with (204). I have been called hedonistic in my approach to literature, and media in general, but honestly I find it difficult to fathom the purpose of literature if it is not to entertain, to move, or to give voice to the author’s thoughts. Humans are here for a handful of years and then we die; I see no point in writing if not to stretch the limits of human creativity. I see little value if people are only staying in the same safe, familiar rut of popular narratives. It is the content that readers of fanfiction come for, the characters, the emotion, and it is the content of the fanfiction that carves such a meaningful place in the hearts of readers. In that, fanfiction fulfills its higher literary purposes: to experiment, like BirchBow’s *Price of Forgiveness*’s take on religious relationships, to entertain, like with CurlicueCal’s cyborg fanfiction *Stay Lost on Our Way Home*, and to move, such as VastDerp’s psychological horror fanfiction *all the corpses stare back*. I do not mean to imply that original fiction cannot be experimental or moving; rather, I am simply asserting the right of fanfiction to be respected in these capacities alongside traditionally published work. Fanfiction encourages creativity and incites emotion within the audience, which are deeply worthwhile pastimes.

As is the case with much of literature, fanfiction is a writing form that allows for an exploration of psychology. Authors and characters alike are complex, and the inner workings of the mind are examined and processed through the act of writing about them. Naturally, this is not particularly groundbreaking, but it is an important function that fanfiction serves alongside traditional publications, and is yet another way that fanfiction holds value.

It is safer to view frightening things about ourselves through a lens, through the smokescreen of a character. Fanfiction operates on a certain psychological level for authors, who often latch onto a favored character, or favored characters, and then explore the traits of the

characters that make them hit so close to home. A character's struggle with grey morality can and sometimes does reflect the author's own musings on the matter, or interest in the subject. A character's exploration of sexual orientation and gender frequently comes from authors' own experiences and curiosities. Authors will also project their own struggles upon a character they like, taking the qualities that the two of them share and magnifying them. This is often referred to as making a character into a 'comfort character,' and is a common practice among fans—even those who do not write their ideas down. The psychological effects of writing about one's experiences are well documented, and an encouraged part of the healing process. The University of Rochester's online Medical Center states that "keeping a journal can help you gain control of your emotions and improve your mental health" ("Journaling"). But not everyone feels inclined to keep a diary; fanfiction and comfort characters provide a venue in which authors can examine their own life experiences, their own relationships, and their own traumas at a safe distance, in a medium that works for them. My friend, Qpenguin98, uses one of their comfort characters, Dave Strider from *Homestuck*, as a method of venting frustrations or as a healthier coping mechanism to deal with suicidal thoughts or the desire to self-harm, as happens in their fanfictions like *Bleeding Out* or *They won't judge you*. The therapeutic nature of writing about one's experiences and hardships proves that writing fanfiction can behoove the well-being of fan authors.

Fanfiction also provides a landscape where comfort characters and self-inserts—characters meant to represent the author—are capable of greatness, bolstering the confidence of the author. Although self-inserts are referred to, quite frequently and demeaningly, as Mary Sues, "Mary Sues are powerful, beautiful, and intrepid," say Chander and Sunder in their article discussing Mary Sues and fair use (599). Self-inserts and Mary Sues allow people to feel capable and explore their own desires in a safe, low-stakes environment. When "writers believe in their

own self-efficacy, self-concept, competence, and self-regulation, they are able to set more effective goals and improve” their writing, so confidence is key, especially for young or new authors just starting out (Curwood 679). Fanfiction is an excellent space for self-exploration, with people like my friend Qpenguin98 writing their own experiences with being transgender, which is a prominent theme in at least seventeen of their sixty-seven works on archiveofourown.org, with people like my friend Luneth seeing her own actions reflected in an autistic character she enjoys and reads a great deal about, guiding her to conclusions about her own mentality, and for people like me, who wrote so many characters in polyamorous relationships that I discovered, rather belatedly, that I enjoy such matters because I myself am polyamorous. In a study conducted by Creswell, Lam, Stanton, Taylor, Bower, and Shermanit, who focused on the relationship between expressive writing and benefits to a person’s well-being, results concluded that writing about emotions “produces self-affirmation... and discovery of meaning” within the individual doing the writing (241). Projecting one’s own characteristics and desires onto fictional characters, and creating characters specifically for the purpose of inserting them into the story worlds a person already loves, is helpful to explore one’s inner self and build one’s self-esteem.

It is not just the inner workings of the authors that fans are concerned with. Fanfiction is flooded with examples of authors picking at the psyches of characters, often more in-depth than the authors of the original work cared to do. Whole fanfictions are born out of “the process of fleshing out the backstory behind characters, situations, and events,” an endless parade of stories created to give detail and nuance (Thomas 13). I mentioned that since fanfiction is not restricted by what is or is not marketable or profitable, authors are able to slow down and linger on subjects. Within *Homestuck*, a clown cult is mentioned and occasionally the cult’s existence is

used to dismiss some of the characters' more capricious behaviors, but BirchBow's *Price of Forgiveness* eagerly constructs a whole social order, culture, and even religious texts for that cult. Many aspects of world building that the author left up to the imagination, BirchBow then went and imagined. The motivations that were previously chalked up to cultish nonsense were extrapolated so that the characters' motivations and patterns of thinking were made sensible. Fanfiction also lingers on the psychological effects of events that take place within the canon, thanks to the removal of barriers that would otherwise make authors rush past the consequences of the original occurrences. Tumblr user ritshoe made a post thanking fanfiction authors for "writing about all the trauma and emotional and mental turmoil that the original content creators dont acknowledge when putting characters through hell." The post received 59,870 notes on Tumblr alone, not accounting for screenshots that were then spread to hosting websites like Twitter or Facebook. This indicates how widespread the sentiment of craving finer emotional depth within literature is, and the consensus among many fans that fanfiction writers simply do it better.

While some fanfictions focus on observing the psychological effects and nuances of events that did occur within the canon, fanfiction authors will also create whole stories based around what potentially *could* have happened, if one or two key details were changed. The speculative nature of some fanfictions is something that many readers, myself included, place a significant amount of value in, and is part of fanfiction's many strengths. Some of the most acclaimed fanfictions hinge on exploring psychology and complex motivations not present within their source material. When *Undertale*, a pc indie game, came out, many were charmed by its hopeful narrative and endearing gameplay. Archive user unrestedjade then asked the question: what could compel a stalwart pacifist to kill someone? Unrestedjade wrote a 105,795

word psychological horror fanfiction around the characters Flowey—a soulless but animate flower that uses violence as entertainment—and Papyrus—a kind, forgiving, compassionate individual who always believed in second chances and the goodness of others—wherein unrestedjade answered that very question. The storyline of *Flowey Is Not A Good Life Coach* follows how Flowey slowly manipulates Papyrus to gradually accept more and more violence, while warping his perception of himself and others’ opinions of him, and pays careful attention to the effects Flowey’s manipulation has on Papyrus’s mental well-being and his actions. While the ending is bittersweet, the fanfiction itself is not for the faint of heart. In fanfiction, authors “create darker stories, ‘better suited to characters with complex experiences’” (Curwood 682). This is true of *Flowey Is Not A Good Life Coach*, as well as other big name fanfictions. In the fandom of the popular anime *Mob Psycho 100*, a fanfiction that stands heads above the rest is *A Breach of Trust* by Phantomrose96, another psychological horror that poses the question: What would happen if someone gentle and kind was kidnapped and kept imprisoned by someone intending to use him? This story follows three characters, Mob—a child with magic powers—Mogami—a ghost using Mob for his abilities—and Reigen—a private detective and ex-conman who eventually rescues Mob. While loving detail is certainly paid to Mob’s mental decay, the fanfiction actually focuses more on the healing after Mob is rescued, and the two-steps-forward, one-step-back nature of recovery. PTSD is not merciful, and Mob is a child at that. Even a fanfiction like *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind* by Scedasticity, which spends an enormous amount of time on original world building and the inner workings of an alien society, is still about the psychology and potential of the characters. When thrown into an alien setting, the characters are forced to examine what is wrong with their *own* ideologies. Feferi, in *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind*, examines how the aliens are coddling her and her friends in her

“kind of [coddling], with a nice cage with everything [they’ll] need,” which forces her to reconsider how degrading and patronizing coddling is, and reassess her own opinions on the matter (Scedasticity). Authors are able to create narratives “that more actively [serve] their interests” and ask all the what-if questions, like ‘what if this character were lonely,’ ‘what if this character grew up in a different time or economic class,’ ‘what if this character were a normal human being,’ or ‘what if this character were queer?’ (Dunlap 270).

Queerness in fanfiction cannot be understated; neither can the presence of people of color, women, or those with disabilities. Diversity within characters in literature and other popular media is essential. Depictions of minority groups can go wrong in any format, including fanfiction, but it is still important to the people of those groups consuming various medias. I previously mentioned that Katrien Jacobs pointed out that fetishization of homosexual relationships can and does occur within fanfiction. While this is naturally a problem, the actions of a few cannot outweigh the meaningful interaction of many queer individuals, as well as other minority groups who find consolation in fandom spaces. As a whole, fanfiction is an excellent tool to *combat* negative stereotypes regarding minority groups, and fan authors utilize fanfiction as a method of creating meaningful, genuine storylines for those collectives.

In general, commonplace or mainstream portrayals of minority groups are less than flattering. Popular media like *The Big Bang Theory* or Netflix’s *Atypical* present an ill-fitting depiction of people with autism. The character Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* is generally unlikable and seen as something of a hindrance, something to be merely tolerated. The main character of *Atypical*, Sam, whose autism is the point of the show, is an “increasingly popular stock character,” according to Matthew Rozsa, a journalist for *Salon* who is autistic himself. Chander and Sunder can attest that “when minority groups are depicted in the media, they are

generally stereotyped” (603). Sam’s supposedly-autistic traits are “violent, creepy, cruel and make the autistic character seem like a monster,” rather than providing a meaningful character that an autistic audience can empathize with (Rozsa). People of color are frequently either the friends of the *actual* protagonists, antagonists, or the first to die—as is the case in a large number of horror movies, thanks to the “unspoken writing rule... that killing off the Black character has little downside with certain audiences” Jon Mixon, a journalist for eleven different online news sources, remarks. Queer characters in media tend to be jokes, dead, or both. The anime *One Punch Man* features a side character referred to as Puri-puri Prisoner, whose entire character revolves around his homosexuality, and how that is creepy and therefore funny. He is given no depth, ends up going to jail for being predatory—which is something the audience is supposed to laugh about—and his appearance is caricatured to be as abnormal and othering as possible. Dead queers are just as commonplace, with even modern shows like *The 100* killing off their lesbian character, Lexa, shortly after she finally gets together with her romantic interest, Clarke. Minority depictions are infrequently flattering, and can be actively unfavorable.

Yes, some popular media does successfully portray minority characters with respect. Rosa Diaz from Brooklyn Nine-Nine is a prime example of a queer woman of color who is depicted with agency and dignity in modern media; I’d even go so far as to say that she is lovingly detailed. But the presence of a few does not and cannot indicate a trend within the whole. While I believe that things are getting better, and audiences are seeing an increase in positive, well-written representation of minority groups in popular media, that does not magically erase the history of countless narratives tailored to the tastes of the majority.

Naturally, queer people, people of color, and those with disabilities who consume the popularized media depicting them as bad, undesirable, or innately morally corrupt, don’t respond

particularly well. One of the ways they do respond is by writing fanfiction that depicts people like themselves positively. Fanfiction “serves to contest popular media stereotypes of certain groups such as women, gays, and racial minorities,” as well as those with disabilities (Chander 599). Fanfiction authors are able to create compelling narratives where characters are queer, alive, and have meaningful complexities and relationships. While the show *One Punch Man* itself propagates unpleasant stereotypes against queer characters, fans who love the story and characters have created just shy of 2,000 fanfictions on archiveofourown.org depicting the main character, Saitama, and his close friend, Genos, in a healthy, homosexual relationship together. This is one of the ways that fanfiction “can be simultaneously homage and subversion,” given that loving, healthy queer relationships were obviously not the original intention of the author (Chander 626). People displeased with media portrayals of disabilities create their own stories, with accurate, sympathetic depictions of those disabilities. Archive user Princex_N found autistic individuals inappropriately represented within popular media, and so, like many folk with comfort characters, decided to make the *Homestuck* characters Dirk, Hal, and Sebastian autistic, drawing from personal experience and researching what he or she does not personally undergo.

People of color are able to take writing into their own hands and “[imbue] the African-American characters with complexity and agency” (Chander 601). *The Best Years Of Your Life* by chaoticTenebrism, on the surface, provides a story about a teenager dealing with bullying, romance, and family relationships, but the author also layers social commentary into the work. ChaoticTenebrism highlights the differences in how people of color are treated, especially how black single fathers are looked down upon and sometimes even marked as inept, and the toxic ideology that prevents young black boys from seeking help because they believe they should be tough enough to handle harassment and violence on their own. Minority groups in fanfiction are

allowed to be powerful and ugly and morally grey, and across the board fan authors are able to “claim agency against a popular culture that repeatedly denies it” (Chander 609). Fanfictions “[offer] a voice for marginalized groups and [reveal] the subversive potential of seemingly safe or familiar storyworlds” (Thomas 7) and highlight “the motivations and desires of readers” (Thomas 6). “Fans’ desires are active,” says Thomas (7), and those “desires are allowed to intrude or impose on the storyworld” (11) in ways that transform characters and settings to better suit what the audience actually wants, instead of what tradition and profitability say the audience should want. KaaVonnia Hinton remarked on the scarcity of diverse literature in the article she collaborated on with Theodore Berry, “Literacy, literature, and diversity.” Hinton wrote that “it was not until [she] reached the eighth grade that” she was given “a book written by and about blacks” (285). So while diverse literature certainly does exist, it is not reaching the audience that would so dearly cherish it—at least not in a timely fashion, and not without difficulty. I do not mean to condemn original fiction in any manner; I only intend to highlight the discrepancy between common depictions of minority groups in literature and other media compared to the realities of those groups, and how fanfiction is a serviceable route to combating those trends. Authors use their own voices in fanfictions, creating the narratives they wish to see, and readers are able to find the storylines they desire with familiar characters they already know and love.

Fanfiction has a plethora of merits that make it meaningful and a worthwhile use of one’s time. I am aware that I am perhaps a bit biased in favor of the art, as a contributor and enthusiastic consumer, but I would be just as biased in an argument for the merits of the humanities thanks to my status as a student majoring in English, or of novels as a bookworm. Fanfiction is a tool used by English Language Learners, young or inexperienced writers, and practiced writers alike to improve and hone their craft. It houses an amazing community that

supports and gives aid and encouragement to the authors, providing a space in which the community members are able to flourish. Fanfiction is unrestricted by marketability or stagnant convention that might weigh on the creativity of traditional publications, and this gives opportunities for unorthodox but meaningful storylines to be written and shared. The nature of fanfiction leads to psychological depth, both in the fanfictions themselves and in the surrounding community. Fanfiction is as diverse as the people who write it, and is a place where the voices of the fans themselves may be heard. I understand that even with these merits, it still will not be everyone's cup of tea, but it is mine, and many others', and it deserves to be recognized for how creative and transformative it truly is.

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